

Alumni Memorial

Sarah Alatha Chaney: Remembered As Scholar, Poet, Alumna

Each year at Awards Day, East Central Community College recognizes those students who have excelled in academics or athletics. A majority of the trophies and plaques



ALATHA CHANEY

awarded to students were presented to the college in honor of former alumni and are designated as Alumni Memorial Awards. The recipient's name is engraved on the award and the trophies on plaque remains at the college in a special display case in the Student Services Building.

In 1964 the family of Sarah Alatha Chaney presented the college with a trophy to be awarded each year to the outstanding graduate in English. Alatha Chaney lost her life in a swimming accident in 1943.

"Billie," as Alatha was affectionately called by her family, was born to Enoch Ray and Lena Gordon Chaney of Hickory, Mississippi on February 23, 1923. At the age of five she began her education at Hope Consolidated School and was graduated from Hickory High School when she was sixteen. She then entered East Central Junior College and upon completion of her sophomore year transferred to Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississippi). Between her junior and senior years at Southern, she taught one year at Chunky, Mississippi.

Mississippi Southern awarded Alatha the degree of Bachelor of Science on July 29, 1943. Three days later on August 1, while wading in the Bowie River near Hattiesburg, she accidentally stepped into a whirlpool and drowned. On August 3, she

was buried at Pleasant Ridge church near her hometown of Hickory.

Alatha had, since early childhood, exhibited a great interest in poetry and the writing of verses. Her parents were always sympathetic concerning her writing efforts and encouraged her in every way. It was understood that she would not be disturbed when she sat down to

write. Her favorite spot was under a great oak tree near the Chaney home, and she often told her mother that the leaves seemed to whisper to her when she went there to write.

In October, 1946, three years after her tragic death, the family collected and had printed a volume containing ninety-two poems selected from among the several hundred she

had written during her brief lifetime.

Alatha's potential was undoubtedly recognized not only by her parents but by her friends and her teachers. Her yearbooks, both from East Central and Mississippi Southern, are signed by many of her fellow students who mention her poetry and offer words of encouragement.

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Throughout her college years, she attracted the attention of her teachers and administrators as well as her peers. Dr. J. B. George, the president of Mississippi Southern College, wrote to her parents at the time of her death, "She will be remembered and her influence felt for many years by all of us who knew her." Dr. L.O. Todd, the president of East Central, wrote, "The memory of this wonderful girl will remain in the minds of us all." Dr. Bessie Hopkins, her English teacher at Hickory High School and later a member of Southern's English Department, likened her to the poet Browning's "Evelyn Hope," and Miss Alma Hickman, another of her teachers, remembered that "Alatha's mind reached out for the best in life and learning."

According to her mother, Alatha began writing simple verses at an early age and continued to write

throughout her life. It is apparent in the rhyme scheme, word choice, and subject matter of her poems that Alatha Chaney felt strongly the influence of country music, Baptist revival hymns, and the after supper conversations which were so much a part of life in the rural South prior to the advent of television.

During her college years, World War II was fought, and the poems which Alatha wrote in those years express her great concern for the fate of those in uniform. Her poems from the war years carry such titles as, "Who's To Blame For It All," "A Salute to Lieutenant Hulon Williams," (Hulon Williams, her classmate at East Central, was killed in action.), and "Jesus In An Army Chapel."

The Chaplain of the 38th Army Division, stationed at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, had 2,300 copies of

"Jesus In An Army Chapel" printed and distributed to each man in the 38th Division Field Artillery. The poem was also printed in the "Reveille," a weekly publication at Camp Shelby.

Alatha Chaney was primarily interested in four things: people, poetry, nature, and God. Her compassion for people, especially for her friends who served in the war and the mothers and sweethearts who awaited their return is apparent in many of her poems.

Most of Alatha's poems were written in a time when the revelation of affection and the open expression of the heart were not considered trite.

She was not always serious. Many of her poems are written with a lilting line and illustrate her capacity for humor.

Alatha Chaney's brief life was spent as a student, teacher, and writer. She did not live long enough, nor

were her experiences broad enough to determine whether or not she was capable of producing work that would eventually merit critical consideration. It is evident, however, in those privately-printed verses which appear in The Poems of Sarah Alatha Chaney that she was a sensitive person who was very much aware of the world in which she lived and wrote.

Recipients of the Sarah Alatha Chaney Memorial Award are: Martha Johnson '64, Ann Williams '65, Karen Laird, '66, Joyce Chaney '67, Sue Evans '68, Joe Graham '69, Donna Coward '70, Wanda Harris '71, Betty Harrison '76, Marion Whinnery '77, Sue Savell '78, Bonnie Reeves '79, Evelyn Pierce '80, No Award '81, Ruth Hurley '82, Donna Whitehead '83, No Award '84, Chris Gilmer '85, Tammy Reed '86, Kim Wilcher '87, Sherri Copeland '88, No Award '89, Candie Beaver '90.

Letter written by Esther Wood Duncan
to her parents in Winston County.
Esther was the sister of Lucille Wood
a member of the East Central faculty.

MRV-92

ECCE

Monday Morning at 30' Close
August 2, 1943.

Dear Family,

I guess you wonder why I'm so so
late or so early well, an awful thing
happen there this afternoon when two of
our girls here were drowned in Roanoke
River. They two I knew at Decatur. Opal
McMullen she was before she married a
Dickenson and Althea Choney from ~~Hicks~~
Chonckin. Of course I knew the McMullen
family at Decatur, and I went to see them.
It sure was a shock to the College. I can
hardly believe it.

I'm O.K., and planning on coming home
Saturday morning. Did you mean for that
money to be my bus ticket too. I don't worry
it can be when the ticket will cost
\$2.50 for a straight way. I just thought
maybe you didn't understand. Well, I don't
have any news, so I'll close. + I'll see you
Saturday.
Love
Esther.

